

NOTE: The President spoke at 6 p.m. from the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Remarks on the Military Strikes on Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters December 17, 1998

The President. My national security team is about to update me and the Vice President on the status of our operation in Iraq. I'd like to begin by speaking for every American in expressing my gratitude to our men and women in uniform and also to our British allies, who are participating in this operation with us.

I am convinced the decision I made to order this military action, though difficult, was absolutely the right thing to do. It is in our interest and in the interest of people all around the world. Saddam Hussein has used weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles before; I have no doubt he would use them again if permitted to develop them.

When I halted military action against Saddam last November, after he had terminated the UNSCOM operations, I made it very clear that we were giving him a last chance to cooperate. Once again he promised in very explicit terms that he would fully cooperate. On Tuesday the inspectors concluded that they were no longer able to do their jobs and that, in fact, he had raised even new barriers to their doing their jobs.

Then yesterday morning I gave the order because I believe that we cannot allow Saddam Hussein to dismantle UNSCOM and resume the production of weapons of mass destruction with impunity. I also believe that to have done so would have, in effect, given him a green light for whatever he might want to do in his neighborhood. I think it would be a terrible, terrible mistake.

We acted yesterday because Secretary Cohen and General Shelton strongly urged that we act at the point where we could have maximum impact with minimum risk to our own people because of the surprise factor. We also wanted to avoid initiating any military action during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is slated to begin in just a couple of days.

Our mission is clear: to degrade his capacity to develop and to use weapons of mass destruction or to threaten his neighbors. I believe we will achieve that mission, and I'm looking forward to getting this briefing.

Impeachment/Military Strikes on Iraq

Q. Mr. President, how are you going to stem the Republican drive to drive you out of office?

The President. Well, the Constitution has a procedure for that, and we will follow it.

Q. Mr. President, as you know, Senator Trent Lott and Dick Armey, the House majority leader, and other Republicans are questioning the timing, suggesting that this was simply a diversionary tactic to avoid an impeachment vote on the House floor. What do you say to those critics?

The President. That it's not true, that what I did was the right thing for the country. I don't think any serious person would believe that any President would do such a thing. And I don't believe any reasonably astute person in Washington would believe that Secretary Cohen and General Shelton and the whole rest of the National Security team would participate in such an action. This was the right thing for the country.

We have given Saddam Hussein chance after chance to cooperate with UNSCOM. We said in November that this was the last chance. We got the report from Mr. Butler saying that he was not cooperating and, in fact, raised new barriers to cooperation. And we acted just as we promised we would. We acted swiftly because we were ready, thanks to the very fine work of the Defense Department in leaving our assets properly deployed. We had the strong support of the British.

And I might add, I'm very gratified by the strong support we've gotten from people among both Democratic and Republican ranks in the Congress who are interested in national security, people like Senator Helms, Senator McCain,

Senator Warner, Senator Hagel, Senator Lugar, all have expressed support for this mission. So I feel good about where we are on that.

Q. Mr. President, will you confirm reports on ground troops in Kuwait?

Q. [*Inaudible*]*—on the first day of the operation and would it undercut your authority if the House opened the impeachment debate during this operation?*

The President. What was the first question, Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press]?

Q. Bomb damage assessment.

The President. I'm about to get it.

Q. You didn't get any from Mr. Berger?

The President. Obviously, I've kept up with it as best I could, but I have not gotten a full report.

Q. But you think it is a success?

The President. I'm about to get a—it's an ongoing mission. I want to wait—

Q. Because Joe Lockhart told us it was a success.

Q. And he undercut your authority, sir?

The President. No. First of all, I'm going to complete this mission—we're going to complete this mission. And the Republican leaders will have to decide how to do their job. That's not for me to comment on.

Kuwait

Q. Can you confirm reports of Saddam Hussein possibly advancing and invading Kuwait and the possible use of ground troops, sir?

The President. No, I have no comment on that. I think that surely he knows what a disastrous mistake that would be.

Civilian Casualties in Iraq

Q. Mr. President, the Iraqis are saying there's been heavy civilian casualties in this. Do you have any information so far that that's true?

The President. I do not. I can tell you what I said last night: We did everything we could to carefully target military and national security targets and to minimize civilian casualties. There is always a prospect that the missiles will miss, that they will be interrupted because of the missiles being fired at them, trying to deflect them from their intended targets. I am quite sure there will be, as I said last evening, unintended casualties, and I regret that very much.

That's one of the reasons that I have bent over backwards, not just in November but also on previous occasions to avoid using force in this case. I did not want to do it; I think all of you know it. But in November, we literally had planes in the air, and I said that it would be the last chance. I think it is very important that we not allow Saddam Hussein to destroy the UNSCOM system without any penalty whatever, to eventually get all these sanctions lifted and to go right on just as if he never made any commitments that were unfulfilled on this score. I think it would have been a disaster for us to do this.

And so, regrettably, I made this decision. There is, I believe, no way to avoid some unintended civilian casualties, and I regret it very much. But I believe far, far more people would have died eventually from this man's regime had we not taken this action.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:45 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House, prior to a meeting with the foreign policy team. In his remarks, he referred to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; and Richard Butler, executive chairman, United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM). A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks Honoring Eunice Kennedy Shriver at the Special Olympics Dinner

December 17, 1998

Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you. Pretty rowdy crowd tonight. [*Laughter*] I am delighted to join Hillary in welcoming all of you here. We're delighted to have you at this re-

markable celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Special Olympics.

Let me say just for a moment, I am also thinking tonight about the brave American men and women in uniform who are carrying out